

THE HAWK

The loud rap made her look up from her desk and stare directly into the eyes of the hawk on the windowsill. He snapped his head once to the left, then rapped at the pool of water below the icicles. He looked up and she said hello. He opened and shut his beak, soundlessly. When she stood, he flew away almost faster than she could follow. She did not see him when she went to the window.

She put a jar lid of water outside the window the next morning, and when he came and drank, she did not move. He flew away quickly.

The next day he watched her for a while, shifting back and forth on the sill. The following day, after he drank, he settled and looked at her so evenly that she decided to approach him. She rose slowly and moved around the far side of the desk, keeping herself in his sight. She walked comfortably to within five feet of the window where she squatted until they were at eye level.

She looked into his sharp yellow eye for a long time, seeing clearly the fine black lines around the pupil and iris. She did not smile. The more she looked the more her face felt like stone or the hard horn of his beak. He disappeared so suddenly that she thought she might have fallen asleep or, more likely, been in a trance.

Meat, she thought. I must put some meat out for him. And more water.

That afternoon she bought beef cubes at the butcher shop on the avenue. She kept two pieces out and froze the rest. In the morning she put the meaty cubes on the edge of a shallow dish of water and set it on the windowsill. She pulled her chair to the window and saw him circle the oak tree once before he landed at the far end of the sill. He looked from her to the plate and back again, adding that curious head snap to the left.

She wondered if it were too new. If she should have kept the jar lid while she introduced the meat. Then he pushed back from the window, spread his wings, and settled by the dish. She was so taken by the sweep of his wings that only later did she remember his knocking the meat off the dish before he drank and ate.

The next morning she found a small rat laid out on the windowsill. Its head and neck were twisted, as though its neck or spine had been broken. The hair on its belly,

mottled gray like moleskin, was marked by two bloody punctures. Fascinated by this gift and wanting to accept it, she opened the window, gingerly lifted the rat by its tail, and carried it to the kitchen. She folded over the top of the garbage bag and took it down to the dumpster in the rear of the building. She went back and set out his dish and meat, taking care to separate them.

When he came, he drank. Then he pushed away from the sill, grabbed the meat in his talons and flew away, dropping the meat just beyond the oak.

The next morning another rat was on the windowsill. She sat and studied it lying there in the sun. The eye was dark and vacant. The hair was coarse, yet remarkably clean. She opened the window wide enough to slide her hand out and stroke the hair. The body was warm. With her thumb and forefinger she pincered the back just above the shoulders, drew it in, and carried it to the kitchen.

Working quickly, unconsciously, she laid it on the cutting board, sliced off head, tail, and feet, skinned it, gutted it, and put it in a pot of boiling water. She added she knew not what spices, but remembered later the taste of mustardseed. When it had cooked for a long time, she put it on a plate and carried the plate, dish, and four pieces of meat to the window. She set the meat and dish out, and when he came for them, she began to eat the rat.

She watched him as they ate. For the first time she understood how he enjoyed pinning the meat to the sill with his talon and tearing off pieces with his beak. Except for that and bending his head to drink, he looked at her as they ate. It was his eye, still his eye that held her, but she was also noticing the movements of his neck and chest, the flex in his legs, the fine colors scattered in his wings and tail.

She found herself cleaning the rat's bones with her teeth, so that by the time he left they were whitening as they lay on the plate. They were so clean that she wanted to keep them. She cleared a space in the upper left hand desk drawer, lined it with shelf paper, and dumped the bones in. As dusk approached, she arranged the bones on the desk top, trying first to recreate the skeleton, then just moving them in interesting patterns.

When the cold weather broke and he no longer needed the water, he continued to bring her small things to eat. And even when one of the brilliant cardinals she used to see at the feeder across the way was laid out on her windowsill and she was sad to see it there, she took it and ate

it, scattering the scarlet feathers among the bones in the drawer. She experimented with his diet, finding that he liked fish as well as meat and getting small fish from the lake in return.

She altered the patterns of her living. Coming to the window before dawn to see him bring the food, preparing what he brought and sitting with him to eat, feeling very tired after he left and, as a consequence, sleeping through the middle of the day, writing her articles in the evening, and spending much of the night trying to see what was happening in the dark yard or sitting transfixed, looking into the night sky.

As winter ended they ate with the window open, and she tried talking. Her language did not interest him. When she was most silent, he would make his own quiet sounds. She began to imitate him until they developed a rudimentary set of signals for welcome, for satisfaction or curiosity about the food, for mutual approval. She invited him in, but he refused. She understood that he did not want her to touch him.

By spring two drawers were filled with bones, feathers, and other remnants of the food he had brought, and she started scattering them on the floor. She was spending every night at the window, feeling her sharpened teeth, the new thin strength in her fingers, the keenness of smell drawing her forward. She talked only to him.

She spent the first warm night seated in the window, her fingers and toes curled over the edge of the sill, her chin on her knees, or stretched out above the yard to see an animal below, a bat, his flight. At dawn he brought her a small cat not yet dead. She snapped its spine, pinned it to the sill with her fingernails, bit into the warm flesh through the fur on its back, chewed, looked up, snapped her head once to the left, and jumped out of the window of her dark apartment into the free bright air of the morning.

-- Michael R. Brown

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AWAKE OR ASLEEP

tours are booked out for papua & samoa & the new hebrides, then the tourists come back unable to speak, they cannot remember their holiday, all they have left is a vague